

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

University of Birmingham
Research at Birmingham

Understanding the Funny Military Music Video

Dinnen, Zara

DOI:

[10.1017/S0021875816000591](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875816000591)

License:

None: All rights reserved

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Dinnen, Z 2016, 'Understanding the Funny Military Music Video', *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 899-921. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875816000591>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Publisher Rights Statement:

(c) Cambridge University Press 2016

Final Version of Record available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875816000591>

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Abstract

Funny Military Music Videos are popular videos featuring soldiers dancing to chart hits, usually parodying other internet music video memes. This article is interested in the conditions of seeing these videos, of their being seen, in specific relation to their military-ness and their American-ness—US soldiers, on a US military base in occupied territory, dancing to US pop music, circulating on US social media sites, watched by a US public. This article claims that as insistent expressions of a popular, militarized, everyday culture, Funny Military Music Videos are exemplary assemblages of the visual conditions of the American military imaginary.

Understanding the Funny Military Music Video

Funny Military Music Videos feature soldiers on a military base, performing choreographed dance routines to recent pop tracks. The dances are nearly always parodying some other group dance meme doing the rounds on YouTube. Funny Military Music Videos are new media assemblages that obscure the site and action of war, and deterritorialize the co-ordinates of occupation. The name “Funny Military Music Videos” is repurposed from a YouTube playlist curated by user Jessica OHara. The work of this article is to understand this category of internet culture—the Funny Military Music Video—as simultaneously a category of war culture, and an exemplary encounter with militarized everyday culture. The videos reside at an intersection of national military and social media platforms and protocols: a soldier dancing to Lady Gaga is likeable, and marketable—selling Lady Gaga, spreading good vibes about the military—whilst simultaneously being, potentially, objectionable as signifier of a particular military policy. The Funny Military Music Video is always part of a non-military, internet-based culture but it is also always marked as different to that culture—by the uniform and weapons, by the particular precariousness of life on base in an occupied overseas territory. These videos exist and perform in ways that exceed what spectators of war may perceive to be the boundaries of war. As Judith Butler has written of war photography that escapes the frame of war, and “troubles our sense of reality”, with these videos “something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things”.¹ Academic critique of the visual cultural production of contemporary warfare has focused on the ways new media have framed the awful, atrocious, and violent as an everyday social milieu; and on the ways new media have shifted the terrain of what constitutes war culture.² There has not yet been critical attention paid to the bad dancing, kitsch camping,

¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2009), 9

² See: Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others” in *New York Times* (2004) <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html>> [Accessed 21 March 2015]; Kristen Daly, “Remediating War in Iraq,” *Peace Review*, Volume 21, Issue 2, (2009), 171-181; WJT Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Peggy Phelan,

low-res imaging, trashy, and disposable funny military music video. These videos are mostly not-exceptional, do not belong to the US military personnel, and are not exclusive to zones of war, but when they are made by US military, from bases in occupied territories, uploaded to American owned social media platforms, and watched and commented on by a primarily American public, they become exemplary engagements of militarized ways of seeing.

The videos are for the most part five to ten years old and a critique is perhaps overdue, but it is now also timely. In 2013 YouTube altered its position on copyright, after the National Music Publishers' Association (NMPA) sued the YouTube network Fullscreen for copyright infringement. YouTube's new rules effectively prohibit cover song videos like the military ones.³ The particular subject of the Funny Military Music Video is also determined by a temporary set of geopolitical circumstances: in February 2014 President Obama announced a further commitment to the drawdown of US troops in Afghanistan, and the handing over of responsibility from US to NATO and Afghan forces by the end of 2014; the withdrawal of US forces in Iraq was officially completed in 2011.⁴ The videos discussed in this article may quickly become signifiers of a transient moment of cultural production in which sanctioned engagement between the US military and social media was still nascent and experimental. These videos might mark the working through of ways of reconfiguring permissiveness—with regard copyright, but also military and government impunity—as well as new networked user/producer subjectivities, and the cultural axis of warfare that emerges through an attempt to soften 'network-centric warfare' with a 'conditional intimacy' on the ground.⁵ The increasing evidence that unmanned

"Atrocity and Action: The Performative Force of the Abu Ghraib Photographs," in eds. Geoffrey Batchen et al., *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (London, Reaktion, 2012), 51-62; Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War* (Cambridge: Polity 2010).

³ See Ryan Lawler, "YouTube Network Fullscreen Sued By Music Publishers Over Unlicensed Cover Songs," *Tech Crunch*. (2013) <<http://techcrunch.com/2013/08/06/fullscreen-sued-by-nmpa/>> [01 August 2014]; Kevin Rawlinson "YouTube star Michelle Phan sued over copyright breach," *BBC News* (2014) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-28418449>> [01 August 2014].

⁴ Spencer Ackerman and Dan Roberts, "Obama orders Pentagon to prepare for full troop withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Guardian* (25 February 2014) <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/25/obama-pentagon-us-troops-withdrawal-afghanistan>> [01 August 2014].

⁵ Derek Gregory, "American Military Imaginaries and Iraqi Cities," in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader (Third Edition)* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 182

aerial vehicles (drones) are preferred to ground troops for initial targeted military engagement in the War on Terror, coupled with the move to further criminalize amateur remix culture on video sharing platforms, signals the coming obsolescence of the Funny Military Music Video.

The Funny Military Music Video is set to pop music and attests to everyday, prosaic temporalities of military life on a base. This temporality emerges through tacit aspects of the production: the sheer time and organisation video production takes attests to a certain amount of free, spare, or down-time; the use of current pop music demonstrates the cultural rhythm of the base is not separate from the cultural rhythm of 'home'—the soldiers access the same media as the civilians they are away from; and the videos themselves stage the domestic spaces of the camp (kitchens, showers), inviting a familiar (and perhaps, familial) viewing of base-space. War is not visible in these videos, but a viewer might recognise the situation to be a product of US military occupation.

This article sets out to know the Funny Military Music Video, to work against the shifting ephemerality of these digital instances, in order to encounter and critically interrogate their function. To work towards an understanding of the Funny Military Music Video is to ask about the what, where and how of these videos. The article undertakes this work through four sections. The first section discusses recent work by Judith Butler and Nicholas Mirzoeff on visibility and “frames of war”, to establish the critical framework through which these videos are visible. These critical theories also ground my approach to the videos’ complex status and shifting purchase on contemporary culture. The second section is focussed on the generic traits of the videos themselves. I reach a consensus about what constitutes the Funny Military Music Video through analysis of popular examples, as well as a recent parody of the genre which appeared in the hit Netflix show *Orange is the New Black*. Developing this sense of the videos as a media genre, and as an affective mode, in the third section I consider the kind of place these videos support and imagine. As a digital file the Funny Military Music Video is never in one place, but as a video of a US base in occupied territory it emerges from a very specific set of

geopolitical affordances; such tension is present in the images of the videos—the uncanny domesticity and anywhere-ness of the desert camp. The final section turns its attention to the medium specificity of these videos’ circulation: social media platforms and the soldiers themselves. Through a discussion of meme culture, platformativity, and the soldiers as creative labourers, the final section contends with the more general tropes of digital media life that are made especially visible through the frame of the Funny Military Music Video.

Seeing the Funny Military Music Video: On visibility and the right to look

In the opening paragraph of the article I referred to these videos as assemblages. I mean this specifically to connote these videos as objects that are never entirely a single entity, never fully stable. They are assemblages because—as the multiple academic fields referenced in this article suggest—“they do not form a seamless whole”.⁶ In order then to understand how the temporary moving image-object of the Funny Military Music Video is assembled and witnessed, I will turn to two critical mediations on visibility and war: Judith Butler’s *Frames of War* (2009), and Nicholas Mirzoeff’s work on visibility in ‘The Right to Look’ (2011).

In *Frames of War* Butler considers frames as ways of seeing; as mechanisms of control, subjugation and also, in their precarious ephemerality, potential sites of resistance. Butler is concerned with acts and images of violence and in this article I am concerned with images and acts of play. This play does not take place outside of military action, or military work, but rather itself signifies the depth of US occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan—its everyday instrumentality. Although Butler’s work in *Frames of War* is at a substantial remove from my work in this article it provides an important critical context. For Butler, “[w]e cannot easily recognize life outside the frames in which it is given, and those frames not only structure how we come to know and

⁶ Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, (London, New York: Continuum, 2006), 4

identify life but constitute sustaining conditions for those very lives”.⁷ Butler’s frame is a way of seeing, but also being and thinking, a condition and a conditioning aspect of these things. To follow the logic that the frame is the structure that bestows recognisability on the subject, the primary frame of these videos might be the US military and the War on Terror. But for the most part the Funny Military Music Video exists within the YouTube frame: someone makes a parody video and uploads it, commenters point out how funny it is, the video is repeatedly embedded and linked to and it is further embedded in internet culture. And yet, as Butler notes, frames are contingent and changeable, and what “is taken for granted in one instance becomes thematized critically or even incredulously in another”.⁸ The videos themselves are also part of a framing apparatus for the ongoing fact of the War on Terror; they are a cog in the mechanics of the ‘War on Terror’; and the ways we see the videos, and see with the videos, is part of the ways our seeing of war is delimited.

The US military have occasionally taken funny military music videos off video upload sites, and comments on different videos can be as negative and hostile as they are positive and supportive. Although rarer than positive responses, typical negative responses include:

Makes it even more sad that good people with lives and sense of humor are being played like chess pawns by corporate swine and send them to kill/die⁹

why is fuuuuuuucking usa doing in baghdad what did iraq do i was in iraq at 2008 they didnt do shiiiiiiiiiiiiit¹⁰

I am happy to see them dancing and doing crazy, when they see this I feel the same as others. But when I saw the video, where they tortured innocent Muslim detainees, and raping Muslim women, I see they are real terrorists masquerading as soldiers.¹¹

⁷ Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2009), 24

⁸ Ibid., 10

⁹ Comment by user Ghaith Malkawi on video *Dance Party in Iraq*

¹⁰ Comment by user Ali Murry on video *US Soldiers in Iraq – The Ding Dong Song*

These comments speak to the potential disrespect of the behaviour of the soldiers toward the culture of the country they occupy, and to the potential disregard of the seriousness of their situation. Butler writes about the way images of war “depart” from one frame and “land” in another.¹² Butler’s is a narrative of travel and more specifically of flight; the implication of Butler’s language is a there and a here, a pairing of foreign and domestic frames. The Funny Military Music Video is produced offsite—offline, off the US mainland—but is framed by US pop culture and a US website. The Funny Military Music Video is at home in the frame it has landed in. But this home is both the site of the video subject—pop music parody—and an incredulous social space. The Funny Military Music Video makes visible “the very process through which new contexts are delimited and formed” as it brings into view uncanny similarities between soldiers and cheerleaders, or holiday camps and military camps.¹³ Such similarities may not be a felt experience for those involved in these video productions, or for all spectators of the uploaded versions; rather they are a generic similarity, and a performative similarity iterated by the contingencies of the YouTube frame.

The videos appear to attest to the social media optic as one that remakes everything in its own image: an effacement of difference and distinction and an assertion of categorisation and connectedness. In ‘Telephone Remake’, a Funny Military Music Video version of Lady Gaga and Beyoncé’s ‘Telephone’ (2009, directed by Jonas Åkerlund) uploaded in April 2010 by the user malibumelcher, the scenes of a military base in Afghanistan are substitutions for the scenes set in a prison in the official video.¹⁴ The narrative of a prison break in the official video cannot be emulated in the military parody; instead the jubilation of freedom is embodied in the choreographed set pieces. The funny military version opens with two soldiers in non-combat Army fatigues miming Lady Gaga’s movements; they are in an enclosed space and a rifle is

¹¹ Comment by user linor anastasya on video *US Soldiers in Iraq – The Ding Dong Song*

¹² Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2009), 9

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Malibumelcher, *Telephone Remake* (2010)

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=haHXgFU7qNI&feature=youtu.be>> [31 July 2014]

visible in the corner of the room. The video is much like other Funny Military Music Videos: it moves between solo and set pieces; soldiers are in various versions of military costume—makeshift crop-tops are on display; and actual weaponry replaces the costume-weaponry of popular music videos. In the song Lady Gaga is on the phone from prison, but is telling the person at the other end that she can't be on the phone because she is "kinda busy". "Kinda busy" as a phrase is repeated several times, and eventually glitched and broken down until it becomes part of the soundscape of the track. Gaga's busy-ness is also her business, the main motif of the song: Gaga is busy being violent. She is busy asserting her power over the other prisoners, brawling, bullying, winning; and once she breaks out with Beyoncé she will continue on a violent expedition. In the funny military video the line "kinda busy" is de facto ironic: the soldiers aren't busy with their jobs, which is why they can make the video.

Although the soldiers are contained, like Gaga, they are dancing instead of fighting. A further ironic detail is in the cut-away to a still of the soldier who is 'being' Gaga. In the official video the longer scenes of Gaga dancing are occasionally broken up with quick flashes of footage from a security video. This image of securitization is not transposed to the military version; the stills of the soldier dancing are just of him throwing poses in front of a standard SLR camera. If the look of the security video were to feature in the military version it would bring into the frame of the video a very literal image of the US imperial project in Afghanistan, and of the soldiers themselves as subjects of military surveillance. The soldiers' performance of Gaga's performance is soft, a little wide-eyed; it is definitely not mimicking the tone of Gaga's movement, which is snarling and aggressive. The frame of war of the contemporary US military-industrial complex can be reflected on through the very fact the soldiers are not performing an overt action of the conditions of visibility for the video—the violent regime of US militarisation. Rather they are visible only as a benign version of the violence of mainstream culture and its military counterpart; these are the images and narrative that delimit the right to look.

Following through with a critique of the frame involves attending to the conditioning and conditional apparatus that make these videos visible, and that permit the kind of object that is being seen. Butler's frame constitutes a way of accounting for bodies, or of accounting for the exclusion of some bodies and the inclusion of others in narratives of state and humanity. One way in which these videos constitute an assemblage is that the bodies in them signify in multiplex ways. In this context the videos show us a set of bodies in occupied territory that, in their present-ness, demand being seen in a way that will always contribute to an unseeing of other bodies in proximity. The soldiers' bodies as they appear in the videos are subjects of a general gaze—the audience of YouTube—but moreover that production is a result of the computational gaze which breaks down their bodies into signal, categories, and reassembles them as a temporary instantiation of a temporary collection of meanings: the Funny Military Music Video. The visibility of the Funny Military Music Video is then an assemblage of nonhuman and human agents. In media theories of assemblages—Benjamin Bratton's "stack" would be a key recent example (Bratton 2012)—the nonhuman agent is a determining figure in our ways of seeing. The military, as a supreme technological entity, is a key example of the integration of nonhuman and human agents in everyday life.

Nicholas Mirzoeff has written that visibility is the "authority", the "exclusive claim to be able to look".¹⁵ The project of looking—this exclusive looking—"must be imaginary, rather than perceptual, because what is being visualized is too substantial for any one person to see".¹⁶ Seeing then becomes "the ability to assemble", which "manifests the authority of the visualizer".¹⁷ It is not any one person that dictates what kind of assemblage the Funny Military Music Video is, or rather, whether it is seen at all; what dictates its visibility is "a set of relations combining information, imagination, and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic

¹⁵ Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Right to Look," *Critical Inquiry* Volume 37 Issue 3 (2011), 474.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

space”—human and nonhuman agents.¹⁸ In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the set of relations that comprise the given ability to assemble a view, or to assemble in view, is the “visual economy [of the] ... American military imaginary”.¹⁹ Mirzoeff’s account of visuality and countervisuality is addressing the same questions as Butler’s work on frames of war: how does it happen that some lives are seen, whilst others are not, and under what regime is this condition made thinkable? I cite multiple disciplinary frameworks to acknowledge the vital complexity and hybridity of the Funny Military Music Video, and the conditions through which it is visible. In addition, both Mirzoeff and Butler’s work demands I acknowledge that the very visibility of the Funny Military Music Video is an aspect of privilege; and any transgressions I discuss these videos as having made are transgressions only within the dominant optic of the military-industrial complex they serve.

Understanding a new genre

The following section of this article identifies the generic traits of the Funny Military Music Video. Here I turn momentarily away from the conditions of their visibility toward the conditions being made visible; the images and relations that constitute the videos. Of interest is how the videos enable an acute way of seeing the contemporary condition of living with technological things, and with states of war that are perpetual, ongoing, everyday. The significant cultural status of the Funny Military Music Video has recently been confirmed by its appearance in a top US TV drama series. The Netflix Original series *Orange is the New Black* featured a “making of” a Funny Military Music Video sequence in episode two, season three, “Bed Bugs and Beyond”. As the Funny Military Music Video itself attests, parodies can make for the most insightful deconstruction of a text; it is worth starting with the *Orange is the New Black* episode to consider how it presents the generic tropes of a Funny Military Music Video.

¹⁸ Ibid., 476

¹⁹ Derek Gregory quoted in Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look”, 485

Orange is the New Black is a comedy-drama set in an all women prison in New York State. Each episode intercuts the day to day drama of life in the prison with flashbacks from a single character's life; these usually detail the sequence of actions that led to the character's incarceration, or to their employment at the prison. In "Bed, Bugs and Beyond" the flashbacks tell the story of one of the prison guards, John Bennett. John Bennett is a military veteran who did a tour in Afghanistan. The first flashback details Bennett conscripting. The second begins with the sound of Gwen Stefani's 2004 pop hit 'Hollaback Girl' as the camera cuts from the 'present' of the show to a dusty, military base. A tent with a front door is in view, and out jumps Bennett, topless, but otherwise in non-combat military fatigues. Bennett wears a bandolier. Other soldiers are nonchalantly positioned sitting on crates but pointing to the star of the show, Bennett, as he bursts through the door. Quickly the image visibly worsens in resolution quality and we see the interface of a digital video camera—the letters REC, a battery symbol, the timer. Then the resolution reverts to the standard quality (as we move from seeing with the camera to seeing what the camera saw) and Bennett dances out the tent with more soldiers emerging from behind him. There is a single female soldier in the film. The soldiers perform a choreographed dance: they wiggle, flex their pecs, grind against each other; the lone female soldier dances by herself, slightly to the side, standing on a crate. The image cuts to Sergeant Page, who is directing an Afghan trainee soldier, Farzad, to film the dance. Eventually the Afghan soldier starts zooming in on the female dancer, her breasts specifically; the scene ends when the commander sees this and yells at him: 'It's only funny because the dudes are dancing, not her. Understand?' Farzad replies: 'no'.

From this scene we learn about the joke the Funny Military Music Video performs: men dancing *as* a female dancer is funny. The costume is part of that. Most of the male soldiers are topless—the female soldier is not—but they wear some traces of weaponry. We have seen this kind of military-type outfit in pop videos, but this time it really is the military; those really are weapons; that really might be used to kill people. In the Funny Military Music Videos I have

watched there has been no evidence of Afghan or Iraqi soldiers on the base. By handing the camera to Farzad *Orange is the New Black* makes the Afghan soldier visible in a way the videos it parodies very particularly do not. The fact Farzad doesn't really get why he would film a load of men dancing with each other is, superficially, a narrative that conforms to imperialist rhetoric of the unenlightened native. Except that here any close-mindedness is immediately reflected back into the enclosure of the US base: you film it precisely because you reject it. It is useful to begin here as throughout the essay what is asserted as at stake in understanding the Funny Military Music Video are the ways it obscures particular bodies from view—camp bodies, female bodies, Afghan and Iraqi bodies—whilst performing them as a reified aesthetic practice.

In the *Orange is the New Black* episode the cut out to the camera, the camera-operator, the director, and the audience (other soldiers are sitting around watching), affords an opportunity to think about these videos as media productions, and specifically, as new media productions that emerge from the spectacle of war. In research attending to the role of new media networks in contemporary US warfare and soldier-hood it is acknowledged that new media modes produce new ways of seeing everyday military life.²⁰ Key for previous research in this area has been the soldier as user-producer. Considering the user producer as an apparatus of war and occupation Fiore-Silfvast coins the term User Generated Warfare (UGW), a play on User Generated Content, to describe the intimate, complicit relations between individual soldiers, a military network, an internet public enabled by personal digital devices (handheld digital cameras, smartphones), and social media platforms such as YouTube. Fiore-Silfvast writes:

Warfare within the new networked information environment emerges within a sociotechnical gathering of Web platforms, platform providers, digital tools, and user communities. [...] UGW describes a mode of conflict among user networks of wartime

²⁰ Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, "US Soldiers Imaging the Iraq War on YouTube," *Popular Communication* Volume 7 Issue 1 (2008), 17–27; Kari Andén-Papadopoulos "Citizen Camera-Witnessing: Crisis testimony in the age of 'mediated mass self-communication'," *New Media and Society* Volume 16, Issue 5 (May 2014), 117-133; Liam Kennedy, "Soldier photography: Visualising the war in Iraq," *Review of International Studies* Volume 35 (2009), 817-833; Brittany Fiore-Silfvast, "User-Generated Warfare: A Case of Converging Wartime Information Networks and Coproductive Regulation on YouTube," *International Journal of Communication* Volume 6 (2012), 1965–1988.

actors, including the U.S. military, as well as nonstate actors such as insurgents and civilians.²¹

The Funny Military Music Video is enabled by the same gathering of platforms, providers, tools, and exists among user networks of military and civilian actors, but are difficult to think of as warfare. As narrativized in *Orange is the New Black*, these videos are the products of soldiers' downtime, they are non-violent, and are not *of* military action; they are by-products of that action.

This article is interested in the specific ways the Funny Military Music Video is both distinctive, and evades distinction. In this mode it expresses the effacing conditions of digital media which operate “everywhere” whilst making invisible the material, geopolitical contingencies of their existence. Other international military groups, sports teams, and institutions make funny dance videos; and these exist on video sharing platforms other than YouTube. The Funny Military Music Video is an example of a generic unsanctioned music video. It is not produced by the management and agency of the singer and song it is set to; it is an example of how music video became a multiplex category as it migrated online. The specific intersection of agency and cultural production encountered in a Funny Military Music Video—US military, US pop music, the YouTube platform—are a distinct set of transgressions: pop music in a war zone; kitsch campy dancing by US military soldiers; the borderless passage of a YouTube banal, writ on the bodies of American citizens, wherever they are, whatever they are doing. Such transgressions enable unusual ways of attending to a platform such as YouTube, and to networked experiences of nationality, power and subjectivity. In order to consider this distinction it is necessary to draw out how these videos do and don't conform to the generic traits of the material they make use of—YouTube music videos. Carol Vernallis argues:

²¹ Brittany Fiore-Silfvast, “User-Generated Warfare: A Case of Converging Wartime Information Networks and Coproductive Regulation on YouTube,” *International Journal of Communication* Volume 6 (2012), 1966

Music video clips on YouTube might help us gain the pulse of today's world: perhaps in our heteroglot but connected environment, these clips will help global citizens discover a shared rhythm. The eruptions of enthusiasm for Psy's 'Gangnam Style,' Carly Rae Jepsen's 'Call Me Maybe,' and 'The Harlem Shake' suggest so.²²

In order to think about how the Funny Military Music Video is of that pulse, or pulsing in time with YouTube, we can turn to a funny military version of one of the internet's enthusiasms Vernallis names, Carly Rae Jepsen's 'Call Me Maybe'.

'Call Me Maybe – version Funny Military' is a video to Carly Rae Jepsen's song, and specifically it is a cover of the Miami Dolphins Cheerleaders' video to the song, which itself is not a parody of Jepsen's video, but rather a video to Jepsen's song with choreography by the cheerleaders.²³ The Miami Dolphins Cheerleaders' 'Call me Maybe' is not the first unofficial video parody/version, its choreography appears to be inspired at least partly by a version by staff at the Staples Centre, LA, California; the "original" viral cover sensation was a home video of Justin Bieber, Selena Gomez, and friends dancing to the song around a house.²⁴ The military version is for the most part a frame for frame cover of the cheerleaders' video. The cheerleaders dancing with tassels and pom-poms are mirrored by soldiers and their ammunition belts and guns, and towards the end of the video, mop-heads.²⁵ A group dance sequence on the cheerleaders' bus is copied by four soldiers hanging out of a Humvee. Underwater shots are replicated in the showers; a tiki hut is transformed into a military lookout. The cheerleaders' video opens with white patent boots stepping across a gravel drive; the soldiers' with desert boots... in the desert. The soldiers' video has been carefully and artfully produced so that it resembles the cheerleaders' as close as possible; whether intentional or not the replication is

²² Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 183

²³ Angel Caído, *Call Me Maybe – version Funny Military* (2013)
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHLBG6IL48>> [31 July 2014]

²⁴ Carolyn Meynes, "10 Best 'Call Me Maybe' Covers," *Billboard*
<<http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/viral-videos/483248/the-10-best-call-me-maybe-covers?page=0%2C0>> [01 August 2014].

²⁵ Several YouTube users have combined the cheerleaders' and military videos side by side; emphasising the faithfulness and strangeness of the re-enactment. See YouTube Multitplier, *Call Me Maybe - Miami Dolphins Cheerleaders vs US Military*, 2013 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7zdr-82WAo>> [14 October 2015]

always made strange—sometimes humorously so, sometimes not—by the substitution of a holiday camp (the cheerleaders’ video appears to be filmed at a beach resort) for military camp.

“Very few DIY videos are there to promote or advertise another text, such as an album, a single, or a movie; on the contrary, their principle function is *self*-referential”.²⁶ The Funny Military Music Video is part of DIY video culture on YouTube; they are of course self-referential, staging and performing stylized versions of the individual soldiers and of the collective troop. They might also be self-referential in the sense they are of an enclosure, and limited by the parameters of the base, always directing the gaze back into the military space. This is the effect of the ‘Call Me Maybe’ cover, a media object that is at once outside the military, in a civilian culture, and also always looking at the military. The *self* of the Funny Military Music Video is not just the subject of the video, the soldiers in the video, or the song; it is the genre of video and it is YouTube. The viral, meme-ness of these videos is a self-referential mode. Hearsum and Inglis suggest that this mode is not in the service of advertising, but a YouTube video is always an advert in the sense it is promoting itself, and YouTube. The design of the platform is to afford the promotion of material via a distributed, database sociality. More explicitly, the videos are made to advertise the songs they are composed to and with, displayed alongside links to the track for sale on Google Play.

Hearsum and Inglis argue that “one of the principle freedoms enjoyed by amateur music video makers is the ability to work outside the constraints imposed by the adoption of familiar patterns and assumptions.”²⁷ The genre of the funny music video, like much memetic amateur video, is parody. Contrary to Hearsum and Inglis’ analysis, the videos play precisely on their proximity to the constrained mainstream. In the case of the Funny Military Music Videos, shots switch between group choreography, solo miming, looks directly in to the camera and

²⁶ Hearsum P and Inglis, “The Emancipation of Music Video: YouTube and the Cultural Politics of Supply and Demand,” in John Richardson et al., eds., *Oxford Handbook of Audiovisual Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2013), 483-500, 484

²⁷ Ibid.

panning shots of the horizon; the sand of the desert base is almost but never the sand of a beach; tanks are like but never cars. Bodies grind against one another and pout soulfully into the camera, they bare midriffs and flutter eyelashes, but they are all male bodies and the more common images of the female dancer and female singer baring midriff and fluttering eyelashes are absent. These videos perform the tropes most associated with contemporary pop music rather than disregard them. In a discussion of Beyoncé and Lady Gaga's video for 'Video Phone' (2009), directed by Hype Williams, Carol Vernallis writes:

Beyoncé and Gaga, as women lined up in chairs, become exchangeable, rotatable.

Visually this video suggests 80s music video aesthetics, with its constant deployment of different dresses, setups, and color backgrounds. [...] But this video seems more adept and concerted in its effects. The setups feel reiterative. Though there is some cross-bleeding, the basic pattern is one after another in a series, with the series becoming more important than teleological drive. But here the reiteration is able to carry us into new realms. More is at stake: sex for profit, pleasure, acceptance, power, or war.²⁸

The cycling of different stagings, different scenes, does describe the Funny Military Music Video but also highlights the function of the military frame as marking the video as parody: there are no different dresses, just a couple different ways of making a khaki t-shirt into a cropped top. Dancing in the Funny Military Music Video is sexualized, but this is instead of an image of war. The markers of life on a base—mess halls, makeshift showers, tanks, weapons, crates—morph into props and settings. But unlike the videos it parodies, the Funny Military Music Video does not perform a reiterative assertion of power, a willingness to commit to war (be it for love or money—as with the examples of Beyoncé, Gaga, Jepson), because it is always-already those things. Its affective resonance comes from the precise ways the feel good pop-iness is a denial of aesthetics of power and war in the instance we gaze directly at them.

²⁸ Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 187. "Telephone" was released in 2009 as a Lady Gaga track featuring Beyoncé, and "Video Phone" (mentioned below) the same year as a Beyoncé track featuring Lady Gaga.

Home from home: the Funny Military Music Video as a networked entity

The multiplex affective resonances of the Funny Military Music Video—the signs of aggression as a performance of pop—are supported by a multiplex iteration of place. The Funny Military Music Video is, like all Internet files, in multiple physical locations; it is constantly refreshed and moves across servers and cables in various geopolitical territories. In addition to this the YouTube platform locates and moderates these videos in particular generic ways. As Hito Steyerl has written with regard Hollywood films and their low res, amateur counterparts, rich images now exist in circulation as poor images—through YouTube, and more contentiously as AVI files on P2P and torrent sites. In its (potentially) illicit relation to the sanctioned images of mainstream culture, the digital image—compressed, poorer—offers some kind of resistance to the mainstream. Steyerl writes: “[t]he poor image [...] is about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities”.²⁹ The videos I have been discussing are not only about what they show, but also connote something of the site at which we encounter them. The propensity of this digital site to be a fractured and flexible frame is one of the ways in which any sense of the geopolitical contentions of the videos’ subjects are overwritten. It is also what determines the look of these videos. The video ‘US Soldiers in Iraq - The Ding Dong Song’ was first uploaded in March 2008 by user do-drugs-today and has since had over four million views—a large number by the standards of the genre.³⁰ Unusually the video is posted with specific details of the troop featured in the video and the location of the base: the dancers are the ‘mortars in HHC 1-21 IN [Infantry] BN out of Baghdad, Iraq’. In addition it includes an end credit sequence that lists the names of the individuals who took part in the production. When watching a selection of funny military music videos it is possible to observe distinct styles, some

²⁹ Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *e-flux Journal* Volume 10 (2009), <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>> [01 August 2014].

³⁰ do_drugs_today, *US Soldiers in Iraq – The Ding Dong Song* (2008) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8rm56hTDDs>> [31 July 2014]

identifiable as the work of a particular producer. The videos demonstrate basic prosumer editing skills. Many are a compilation of found video footage and stills, edited and choreographed to be in sync with the song to varying degrees. As you spend more time watching these videos you begin to recognise clips that reappear across different videos, set to different songs. The user ‘bosphotomans’ has uploaded eight videos, six of which are about or of the military. It is not entirely clear if ‘bosphotomans’ is in the military; his style involves remixing other videos. As well as using found footage ‘bosphotomans’ tends to speed up footage to sync it with his chosen track, and often uses preset editing effects such as blur and fade. bosphotomans’ videos are iterations of the swarm circulation of fractured and flexible poor images.

The videos index a networked digital prosumer culture as much as they index the soldiers and the military site. In an article on violent rap and metal music videos made by US soldiers in the Middle East Christian Christenson has outlined stylistic tags associated with particular user/producers. Britta T Knusden and Carsten Stage, when researching Danish video War Memorials on YouTube, observed a similar tendency: particular producers, or in their term *producers*, have their own style of video making.³¹ These professional soldiers are not only illustrating, or documenting their lives, or mourning others’ lives with these videos; they are also producing themselves as video makers. The video-making-subject is culturally knowledgeable, and skilled, reappropriating shots from the generic signs of pop music video. As Christenson suggests:

What becomes clear when watching music video after music video by soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan [...] is the degree to which the producers are familiar with, and can easily adapt, well-established aesthetic and narrative codes and practices, and seem

³¹ See Christian Christenson, “Hey Man, Nice Shot”: Setting the Iraq War to Music on YouTube,” in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds., *The YouTube Reader* (Sweden: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 204-217; Britta T Knusden and Carsten Stage, “Online war memorials: YouTube as a democratic space of commemoration exemplified through video tributes to fallen Danish Soldiers,” *Memory Studies* Volume 6, Issue 4 (2012), 418-436.

to have little problem creating what are in some cases high-quality audiovisual products made under astonishingly difficult conditions.³²

In the case of the Funny Military Music Video the quality of the product might be judged on production technique, but also on the use of the explicit narrative codes and practices associated with pop music choreography and popular parody. Far from professional quality, the dancers' performances bind these videos to discourses of pop parody and amateur reappropriation, and in various ways to the low-res, image-thing, meme culture of the internet. As Jacob Ciocchi, of the art collective Paper Rad, has noted, "[t]he quality on YouTube is, by many standards poor [...] but it doesn't seem to get in the way of people using it".³³ The Funny Military Music Video is a product of this framing of YouTube culture at the same time as it is a product of contemporary US military practices. When we look at the 'bad' quality of the Funny Military Music Video we are seeing a generic YouTube DIY aesthetic as much, if not more than, we are looking at the limitations of the site of production.

The relationship between the videos, their site of production in terms of geography and their mode of production and dissemination in terms of US satellite links, and US platforms, instantiates certain affective qualities through their framed, and embedded status. The videos emerge from old networks; the cybernetic being together of military and corporate technology development, and pop culture. Whilst the videos may be the latest veneer on an old (military-industrial) complex, they also might signify new terrains and frontiers of war. Harry Halpin has called these new battles "immaterial civil war". Halpin uses the term to describe a "new geopolitics in the virtual space of the Internet"; the "capture of personal data by platforms".³⁴ The immaterial civil war here describes the global reach of corporate competition played out in

³² Christian Christenson, "Hey Man, Nice Shot": Setting the Iraq War to Music on YouTube," in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds., *The YouTube Reader* (Sweden: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 206

³³ Ciocchi is quoted in Rachel Wolff, "All the Web's a Stage," *ArtNews* (2008), 101
<http://www.artnews.com/2008/02/01/all-the-webs-a-stage/> [21 March 2015]

³⁴ Harry Halpin, "Immaterial Civil War: The World Wide War on the Web," *Culture Machine* Issue 14 (2013)
<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/508/523> [31 July 2014]

pursuit of the ultimate total institution: us(ers). The soldiers in the Funny Military Music Video might be participating in two kinds of war—the one on the ground and the one they are unwittingly subjects of as they participate in the YouTube platform. Joss Hands suggests:

‘Platform’ is a useful term because it is a broad enough category to capture a number of distinct phenomena, such as social networking [...]. The term is also specific enough to indicate the capturing of digital life in an enclosed, commercialized and managed realm.³⁵

The very usefulness of the term platform is in the way it gestures toward multiplicity and singularity: platforms are nebulous concepts and distinct political practices. The platformativity of the Funny Military Music Video transgresses the geopolitical borders of war. In the instance of the Funny Military Music Video the videos are made on base and likely uploaded there, via the affordances of “civilian run internet cafes on base, [which are] not connected to military networks.”³⁶ The videos are monitored by the US military as part of their control of information, but they do not constitute classified material, and are required to adhere only to intellectual property laws in the same ways as all user generated content uploaded to YouTube or other video sharing sites.³⁷ The platformativity of YouTube can overwrite the US military context in a technical and geographical aspect. This technical and geographical break is reflective of the nascent ways these videos instantiate a fantasy version of the military regime. Platforms purport to exceed national borders and to exist in excess of the individual—to be a social global imaginary. Distinctly in the Funny Military Music Video, this social global imaginary—the

³⁵ Joss Hands “Introduction: Politics, Power and ‘Platformivity,’” *Culture Machine* Issue 14 (2013) <<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/508/523>> [31 July 2014]

³⁶ Nicole Clark, “Cyber Information Control Strategies,” in *media res* (2014) <<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2014/01/14/user-generated-media-and-comedy-war>> [17 January 2014].

³⁷ See Weller “Military will block YouTube, MySpace, iFilm overseas,” *The Seattle Times* (2007) <<http://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/military-will-block-youtube-myspace-ifilm-overseas/>> [21 March 2015]; Bowman, “Military Addresses Double-Edged Sword Of Troops On Social Media,” *NPR.org* (2012) <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2012/05/21/153003267/military-addresses-double-edged-sword-of-troops-on-social-media>> [21 March 2015].

everywhere-ness of US pop parody and US social media—is a making benign of the imperialist social imaginary of the US War on Terror.

Moves for hire: the soldier as creative labourer

The making benign of violent action is, in the case of the Funny Military Music Video, a process of meme-ing meaning. The internet meme is a cultural production and critique that performs a current-ness which ensures its near instant obsolescence. The Funny Military Music Video is of meme culture, the videos are memes, or responses to more visible memes. In research on the ‘anatomy of a meme’, Limor Shifman reviewed thirty memetic YouTube videos to ascertain what they had in common, and what the formula for a meme might be. Shifman concluded that memetic videos tended to confirm to some variation of six distinct features: a “focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness and whimsical content”.³⁸ These are characteristics not typically associated with military actors, but the Funny Military Music Video does conform to some of these. They are humorous and the humour comes in part from the simplicity of the parody. Whilst it might seem odd to describe the content of Funny Military Musical Videos as whimsical, in comparison to what we might expect of images from war the videos are whimsical—certainly they are playful and fanciful. The meme is a condition of seeing the Funny Military Music Video, and a condition of the videos’ existence. The meme frames the dancing soldiers as they also perform the meme. Our encounter with the meme is conditioned by the frame of YouTube, of which the interface and architecture are designed to enable and propagate the proliferation of a meme. In Butler’s *Frames of War* she rarely writes of a literal frame—a newspaper, a screen. Butler’s concern is with conditions of spectatorship, and the possibility, or not, for transgressing those conditions. YouTube is a tool of Butler’s frame. It is a particular tool because it itself is a complex frame emerging as an assemblage, and in addition it

³⁸ Limor Shifman, “An anatomy of a YouTube meme,” *New Media & Society* Volume 14, Issue 2 (March 2012), 187-203, 192

is all about seeing and being seen. YouTube can be thought of as a material-metaphor for the way Butler describes frames working, whilst being itself a condition of, and a conditioning encounter with, spectating and verifying. YouTube is a condition which very visibly determines ways of seeing, and the possibilities, or lack of, for producing counter experience. The social media function of YouTube—the comments and sharing, the profiling and authenticating—are what confirms these videos as productions of actual soldiers, in an actual war. A distinction of the Funny Military Music Video is that it is not just exemplifying any frame, but specifically a frame of war.

Although the Funny Military Music Video is a transgressive action of war, it is simultaneously a model iteration of YouTube, conforming to the traits Shifman identifies as crucial to the success of a YouTube video. Writing about platformativity Joss Hands argues that the “internet is vanishing”; in place of the internet we encounter “a multiplicity of distinct platforms”.³⁹ Hands is attuned to the ways branded platforms might have come to stand in place of a distinct site or behaviour called the ‘Internet’. Seeing the site of the Funny Military Music Video as the YouTube platform—and the platform as signifier of the frame at large, the discourse of visibility of the US military-industrial complex—enables a way of watching the videos as generic networked digital media, emerging from multiple sites of production and storage, and, simultaneously, as specifically military productions. The particularities of the YouTube platform produce the video object we view. The platformativity of YouTube has the videos circulate with their official pop counterparts; and puts the videos on a page with a click through to the Google Play store to buy the featured song. It is the platform’s distinct interpretation of copyright that means the click through is not to the official single release, but to an option to buy the song from a compilation. In addition the link to Google is itself a manifestation of corporate platformativity: YouTube is owned by Google, and is therefore ‘on’

³⁹ Joss Hands “Introduction: Politics, Power and ‘Platformativity’,” *Culture Machine* Issue 14 (2013) <<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/508/523>> [31 July 2014]

the Google platform.⁴⁰ The Funny Military Music Video has emerged in connection with a wider trend to mediatize the everyday, specifically the lives of soldiers themselves. The video that is embedded in a platform like YouTube cannot be separated out from the contingencies and provocations of the platform. In the case of the Funny Military Music Video this process of embedding video has an uncanny corollary in the more general ways US soldiers have been part of a mediatization of the military everyday.

In the context of the US military in Iraq after 2003, embedding was the process devised by the military to better manage media coverage of their actions. Embedded journalists and photographers were given unlimited access to ground troops—an unprecedented approach of transparency from the military.⁴¹ This access was framed by the individual journalist's dependency on the troop they were stationed with. Embedded reporting was considered a compromise between the open, uncontrolled media access of Vietnam, and the abstract, long-distance view of the first Gulf War. The strategy of embedding cultural production within the military itself created a distinct visual vocabulary. When coupled with soldiers' access to personal cameras and social media, and the embedding of video in military systems, embedded reporting produced images of the personal, and everyday, alongside the horrors of the war, and the extreme violence of some military protocol.⁴² The proximity of these different kinds of embedding—soldier-operated personal cameras, embedded journalists, videos embedded in social media platforms—demands an analysis of mediatized everyday images of war as 'user-generated'. Fiore-Silfvast has written on user-generated-warfare, but a theory of the Funny Military Music Video must also be attuned to a far more prosaic aspect of user-generated content: the way it makes the user work.

⁴⁰ Lucas Hilderbrand, "Youtube: Where Cultural Memory and Copyright Converge," *Film Quarterly* Volume 61, Issue 1 (2007), 48-57

⁴¹ Andrew M. Lindner, "Among the Troops: Seeing the Iraq War Through Three Journalistic Vantage Points," *Social Problems* Volume 56, Issue 1 (2009), 21-48

⁴² Martin C. Libicki et al., *Byting Back -- Regaining Information Superiority Against 21st-Century Insurgents* Santa Monica: Rand Corporation (2007) <<http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG595z1.html>> [01 August 2014].

As with all user generated content, when watching the Funny Military Music Video we need to take into account what the work of generating this video looks like. The Funny Military Music Video is a show of downtime. In these videos soldiers are not involved in violent action, but they are occupying territory, and in doing so are making visible the work of the military beyond combat. The soldiers are at work but appear to be at play. The soldiers occupy foreign territory, and they produce content for YouTube. The videos signify the amorphous nature of digital labour and the digital economy. As Tiziana Terranova has noted:

The digital economy is [...] about specific forms of production [...], but it is also about forms of labor we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real-life stories, mailing lists [...]. These types of cultural and technical labor [...] are part of a process of economic experimentation with the creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect.⁴³

Here Terranova calls on Richard Barbrook's analysis of the digital economy as a mixed economy—public, market-driven, and gift—to introduce the way in which different types of labour emerge within digital networks, and have monetary value accrue through them. The Funny Military Music Video is that kind of labour we might not “immediately recognize as such”. Partly because the videos are produced by individuals for a public that might meet through YouTube, but are not produced *for* YouTube, and partly because these videos—in keeping with the genre of the home movie—depict play, not work. The videos are neither seen nor cited as the product of labour, rather they appear to be developed outside of the “economic needs of capital.”⁴⁴ And yet the platform of YouTube is such that these videos do participate within a monetary economy. The Google and YouTube platforms earn from the videos via advertising and other networks of finance. YouTube and record companies permit the potential infringement of copyright because the videos are used to market the material again at a new

⁴³ Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor,” in Trebor Scholz ed., *The Internet as Playground and Factory* (New York: Routledge 2013), 33-57, 38

⁴⁴ Ibid., 39

point of user/customer encounter.⁴⁵ This is not a nuanced operation, but is made explicit by the option to click on a button next to the video and buy the featured track through Google Play. As part of the increased mediatisation of everyday military life the video becomes a way for the public to view the work of the military; in the performative labour economy of social media the accumulation of labour practices ends up rerouted via YouTube as a social practice, which invites the public to appreciate military work as a kind of social practice.

An exceptional Funny Military Music Video is Codey Wilson's "Military" Blah Blah Blah Remake - Ke\$ha ft 3OH!3'.⁴⁶ The video has been produced with explicit reference to the repeal of 'Don't Ask Don't Tell'.⁴⁷ The video is a meta-commentary on the camp aesthetics of the Funny Military Music Video; an ambiguous critique of sexuality in the military; and a self-conscious promotional work for director/producer Codey Wilson, who subsequently left the military and has ambitions to be a movie director "like Michael Bay".⁴⁸ According to Wilson the video was poking fun at what would happen if gay soldiers were open and out in the US military.⁴⁹ The video comprises a sequence of set pieces, scenes. In each scene a soldier or group of soldiers mime the song and dance in rhythm. Each scene is a parody of a pop video: a shot of a row of shower cubicles from which the soldiers pop their heads out all soapy and sing along to the lyrics cuts to two quick scenes of a soldier dancing on top of a tank, body silhouetted against a blue sky; a couple scenes later and a guy is spread-eagled against a tank, twerking for the camera. The video was first uploaded to YouTube by Wilson in May 2010. It went viral (was reposted by the Huffington Post and Perez Hilton) and was then removed by the military. Later 'remakes'—which are rips of the original video—appeared on YouTube. On YouTube the video

⁴⁵ Lucas Hilderbrand, "Youtube: Where Cultural Memory and Copyright Converge," *Film Quarterly* Volume 61, Issue 1 (2007), 48-57

⁴⁶ klalallkl, *ke\$ha Blah Blah remake in IRAQ!! CODEY WILSON PRODUCTION* (2010)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ya9iFYmdYp4> [31 July 2014]

⁴⁷ Lisa Taddeo, "The Ke\$ha-Loving, Command-Defying Army Auteur," *New York Magazine* (2010)
<http://nymag.com/news/features/67399/> [01 August 2014].

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

is the subject of contentious comments: “Do this shit in California, but keep out of Muslim lands”⁵⁰; “TAKE A JOKE PEOPLE!!!!”⁵¹. One commenter claims to be in the video and posts:

I am the soldier at one minute with the tramp stamp. It’s great to see people still love our video. Honestly though this video was a blowing off of steam. We never thought it was gonna take off like it did. We all still talk about it among our friends and family and quite frankly it was supposed to be just for family.⁵²

The video is subject to marketing Ke\$ha’s ‘Blah Blah Blah’, via Google Play. The video is for the most part described as “gay”, and this is for the most part perceived as “funny”.

The platform of YouTube makes this video a commodity that points away from its site of production toward the selling of a Ke\$ha track, but it is also embedded as a commodity working toward the professionalization of Wilson’s video making. The video in the context of YouTube is additionally a public platform to debate US military policy. It is ‘about’ sexual politics, and the comments respond to this, but the video is not advocating a political position, and calls out to the homeliness of YouTube—a platform for you to broadcast yourself—as a defensive frame: “Honestly though this video was a blowing off of steam. We never thought it was gonna take off like it did”. Though this statement might be reflective of the view of the soldiers in the video it is not reflective of Wilson’s intention, as he has subsequently claimed it, of becoming famous and of promoting himself as a director. YouTube as a public platform relies on the precise contingency of social media to make publishing on a public (but privately owned) platform also appear as communing and communicating via a private channel.⁵³ The social of YouTube can be simultaneously an unknown public and your personal network. In this way the

⁵⁰ Comment by user Ibrahim Jibraeel on video *ke\$ha Blah BLah remake in IRAQ!! CODEY WILSON PRODUCTION*

⁵¹ Comment by user nellz442 on video *ke\$ha Blah BLah remake in IRAQ!! CODEY WILSON PRODUCTION*

⁵² Comment by user TrampStamp109 on video *ke\$ha Blah BLah remake in IRAQ!! CODEY WILSON PRODUCTION*

⁵³ See Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” *Cultural Politics* Volume 1, Issue 1 (2005), 51-74; Sam McBean, “Remediating Affect: “Luclyn” and Lesbian Intimacy on YouTube,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* Volume 18 (2014), 1-16.

video is exemplary of YouTube as both an everyday platform for everyday things, and a site for the promotion of the individual as a creative labourer.⁵⁴ But, as the comment about “Muslim lands”, and the pulling of the original video by the US military makes clear, these videos are a very specific kind of ‘home’ video, and they exist as part of the visual culture of what Andén-Papadopolous has named the first “YouTube war.”⁵⁵ In Andén-Papadopolous’ analysis, YouTube constitutes a new kind of military frame, enabled by the affordances of mobile digital recording technologies. The Funny Military Music Video is an example of the many ways the Iraq war of 2003 has been reported via images of everyday life. These are images of the mundanity as well as the atrocity of occupation and invasion. Like soldier’s video diaries, and the journalism of embedded reporters, these funny videos attest to the everyday routines of life in the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s.

Conclusion

If you are susceptible to what is feel-good about some pop music, or if you are likely to want to dance when you hear certain beats (or when Lady Gaga tells you to), then you are going to *feel good* watching these videos. Feeling uplifted by the Funny Military Music video is unsettling; especially for those who may not identify themselves as sympathetic observers of the US military in the Middle East. Writing about ‘uplifting’ moments in contemporary pop music, Robin James has argued that these moments embody and elicit identification with modes of resistance demanded of today’s good neoliberal subject.⁵⁶ Pop music is a site through which we might learn to become good practitioners of neoliberal logic. The militarisation of this formation in the

⁵⁴ See Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor,” in Trebor Scholz ed., *The Internet as Playground and Factory* (New York: Routledge 2013), 33-57; Mark Andrejevic, “Estranged Free Labor,” in Trebor Scholz ed., *The Internet as Playground and Factory* (New York: Routledge 2013), 149-164

⁵⁵ Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, “US Soldiers Imaging the Iraq War on YouTube,” *Popular Communication* Volume 7 Issue 1 (2008), 17–27

⁵⁶ Robin James, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Winchester: Zero books, 2015)

Funny Military Music Video is a reminder of the role of war in normalising the conditions of precarity and inequality necessary for neoliberalism to flourish.

The affective register of the Funny Military Music Video is one of the many things at stake when thinking about the videos as a production of war and a trashy object of the internet. These videos are enabled by protocols of embedding as part of YouTube and US military communications strategies; they exist as pop parody and soldier video diaries; and they signify work and play in the context of the military base and social media content production. The Funny Military Music Video is a genre that affords us the opportunity to recognise the complex ways social media makes all content in its own image, and the multiplex ways we encounter new iterations of new media frames of war. When thinking about what this video is, and does, and what its affective resonances have been, or might be, it would be problematic to arbitrarily frame it within the discourse of one academic field or another. Rather the videos are of and about the various critical circumstances raised here: pop culture and feel good moments; new media culture as meme culture, and new media culture as everyday mediation; media and war as a particular vernacular and political praxis; social media and the US military-industrial complex as conditioning technics; and the ways of seeing, the frames, that determine who, what, and where is visible.

Just looking at these videos and thinking that such resonances can be felt, is not enough. As both Butler and Mirzoeff recognise, we are all seeing and being seen through specific conditions of visibility: militarized, politicized optics that delimit the act of looking. The Funny Military Music Videos do not offer a counter-visibility, but in their being so very insistently expressions of a popular, militarized, everyday culture they are exemplary assemblages of the visual conditions of the “American military imaginary”. The critical engagement and mobilisation

of their very commonness undertaken in this article offers one way we might own the right to look, and disrupt the frames of visibility we encounter.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Zara Dinnen is Lecturer in Modern & Contemporary Literature at University of Birmingham. Her research is on new media and contemporary American culture and she has published on this topic in *European Journal of American Culture*, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, *Studies in Comics*, *N-Media*, *Alluvium*, and *In Media Res*. I would like to thank Sam McBean and Anna Hartnell for their input into early versions of this work.